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ABSTRACT

This colloquium report contains two papers that present perspectives on the book, "The Closing of the American Mind," by Allan Bloom. The first paper, by Maxine Greene, covers the book's philosophy. It asserts that the book deals with issues of American literacy on a superficial level, and actually is more concerned with refuting points of view such as feminism, cultural relativism, and philosophies influenced by Nietzsche and Dewey. It questions Bloom's definition of "closing" in the title and shows that his idea of the open mind seems to flourish best in a closed society. She proposes that those concerned with public education and democracy must reject the premises of the book. The second paper, by William Birenbaum, points out the vast differences between education in Plato's "Republic", which Bloom offers as a model, and education in twentieth century America. The differences are noted in the material sense and even more so in the values to which American society is committed. A series of questions about the nature and desirability of liberal education is posed. The book is described as a provocative class session for reactionaries and would-be reformers to find methods of reopening the collective mind in the consideration of the future of the United States. (VM)

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Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind:* Two Perspectives

Maxine Greene
William Birenbaum

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Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind: Two Perspectives

Maxine Greene
William Birenbaum

April 1988

A colloquium sponsored by the Institute on Education and the Economy, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York, November 18, 1987.

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OPENING REMARKS AND INTRODUCTION OF THE SPEAKERS

Sue E. Berryman
Director
Institute on Education and the Economy
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New York, New York

I want to welcome you to this colloquium on Allan Bloom's best-selling book, The Closing of the American Mind. I had the pleasure of lunching with our two speakers last week, and I know what a special afternoon you have ahead of you.

Before I introduce our two speakers, let me quote from the history o the world, as understood by the students of St. Paul's School. Richard Lederer of St. Paul's spliced together sentences from student term papers and examinations in history. What they did to Greek history gave new meaning to the term "Greek myths." But it was in their hands that the Renaissance experienced a true rebirth.

> The Renaissance was an age...[when] Martin Luther was nailed to the church door at Wittenberg for selling papal indulgences. He died a horrible death, being excommunicated by a bull. It was the painter Donatello's interest in the female nude that made him the father of the Renaissance. It was an age of great inventions and discoveries. Gutenberg invented the Bible. Sir Walter Raleigh is a historic figure because he invented cigarettes. Another important invention was the circulation of blood. Sir Frances Drake circumcised the world with a 100-foot clipper.

My question is--and I leave it our two speakers and to you in the audience to answer it--**Is this the closing or the opening of the American Mind?**

We are very privileged to have speaking to us today, Dr. Maxine Greene, William F. Russell Professor in the Foundations of Education at Teachers College here at Columbia University, and Dr. William Birenbaum, most recently the President of Antioch University. Dr. Greene--who needs no introduction to those of you from Teachers College--is a noted authority on aesthetics and education. She has

authored several books, including The Public School and the Private Vision, Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy in the Modern Age, and, now in press with the Teachers College Press, The Dialectic of Freedom. A member of the National Academy of Education, she is director of the Teachers College-Lincoln Center Project in the Arts and Humanities. She earned her Ph.D. at New York University, and has been awarded honorary degrees by Lehigh University, Hofstra University, and Bank Street College.

Dr. William Birenbaum, who has his doctor of law degree from the University of Chicago, started his professional career as Dean of Students of the College at the University of Chicago, under the then-President of the University, Robert Hutchins. He has served as president of the Educational Affiliate of the Bedford-Stuyvesant D & S Corporation, Dean of the New School for Social Research, President of Staten Island Community College of the City University of New York, and, as I mentioned earlier, President of Antioch University. Finally wearying of higher education administration, he has just started a new venture, Corporate/Education Strategies.

Some Notes on Bloom: Toward A New Bloomusalem

Maxine Greene
Wm. F. Russell Professor in the
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Allan Bloom has become a culture hero, even a hero of popular culture. He has appeared on talk shows; his picture has been repeatedly reproduced. Reviews of his book have proliferated for general and for specialized audiences in media as divergent as The New York Review of Books and Readers Digest. He has been so often interviewed that we are as familiar with his cigarette-smoking habit and his black leather couch as we are with the tone of his jeremiad. It is not a tone--or a jeremiad--unknown in this country. We hear it every twenty years or so: the harangue of the Defender of the Faith of the House of Intellect against the depredations of heretics or barbarians. Those of us concerned today about public education find something inimical in that tone, because it sounds so elitist and anti-pluralist, so rejecting of the young for whom we feel most responsible. At once, because we too are troubled about the life of the mind today, we are bound to take the implicit challenge seriously. Indeed, that is the reason why Sue Berryman and her National Center on Education and Employment saw fit to initiate this dialogue. I feel privileged by their sponsorship and grateful for the opportunity to express a point of view on Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind.

My discipline happens to be philosophy of education; and I must say that I have been most influenced over the years by John Dewey and by certain existential thinkers. It seems clear to me that Bloom would say mine are the wrong credentials for tackling a work like his. Among other things, I am a woman with feminist inclinations; and Bloom blames feminism for eroding that "female modesty" which traditionally extended sexual differentiation to the whole of life and made men and women "always men and women" (rather, say, than professors and lawyers, physicians and painters). He writes that feminism has been greatly

responsible for thinning out the vitality of the great books and for distorting human relationships. All this has seriously contributed, he suggests, to the "closing" of our minds.

Bloom might also question my credentials because of my continuing interest in (and teaching of) the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom he blames for cultural relativism, "decay," and worse. (Yes, I know the objections to them and will elaborate a bit further on. But to put the onus on them for the rejection of reason and the breaking of the "common thread" of a tradition that presumably provided the "university as we know it" its raison d'etre seems to me to go outside the limits of rational argument.) There is, finally, a third sense in which Bloom might think me suspect. I am and have been much engaged with interpretive study in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities; and Bloom is apparently devastated by the advance of hermeneutics or interpretation, which he blames not merely for the eradication of texts, but of the "reality to which texts refer."

For all that, I do not choose to back away from questioning his views. Committed as I am to the "doing" of philosophy in a number of fields, I happen not to believe that philosophy is a "culminating science" with the capacity to reflect "the unity of the intelligible order of nature." I need simply to point to Richard Rorty's widely regarded book, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, 1979), to remind people that philosophy has more than one string to its bow. (Rorty's objection is to a picture "which holds traditional philosophy captive...that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations--some accurate, some not--and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods." As he and many others have made clear, he is not alone.) Despite what Bloom would see as my flaws, perhaps the flaws of cultural modernity, I do not ordinarily wear a Walkman (like his students in their Michael Jackson costumes covering their Brooks Brothers suits) and am not deaf to the great tradition. In fact, I am like Bloom in yearning to find students who have read and

loved what I have read and loved. Like him, too, I am troubled by banality, narrow-minded materialism, lack of commitment and concern.

"What do women want?" Freud is supposed to have asked in some extremity. I am inclined to ask, with the same intensity: "What does Allan Bloom want?" Perhaps first I should ask, as Freud should have done, "Who is Allan Bloom, and what does his work have to say to our actual predicaments today?" Robert Paul Wolff, another well-known philosopher, wrote in his Academe review (Sept.-Oct., 1987) that he is a character in a new Bellow novel, "a mid-fiftyish professor at the University of Chicago, to whom Bellow gives the evocative name, 'Bloom.'" Saul Bellow, in fact, is responsible for the preface to the book, and the preface includes a page on his novel Herzog, which (said Bellow) made "fun of pedantry." For Wolff, The Closing of the American Mind is an extended satire of just that kind. "'Bloom' is the quintessential product of the distinctive educational theories that flourished at the college of the University of Chicago during and after the heyday of Robert Maynard Hutchins." Hutchins, it will be recalled, was one of those responsible for the educational theories embodied in the "Great Books" approach to pedagogy. For him, higher education should be devoted to training the intellectual virtues, or "habits resulting from the training of the intellectual powers." In The Higher Learning in America (1936), Hutchins wrote: "Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same." Apparently impervious to human diversity and to the range of human capacities, he continued emphasizing the "cultivation of the intellect." And what stood in the way? Hutchins said it was "the love of money, a misconception of democracy, a false notion of progress, a distorted idea of utility, and the anti-intellectualism to which all these lead...." At other times, he would stress vocationalism, materialism, pragmatism, and the writings of John Dewey.

For Allan Bloom the obstacles appear to be primarily feminism, rock music, relativism, the tradition of the 1960's and German philosophy.

He is drawn to making lists of thinkers who are good and thinkers who are bad, of those who have brought enduring harm. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, most of the men of the Enlightenment: these are good. Rousseau, Locke, Kant, and Hegel are problematic; Freud, Marx, and Weber (all influenced by Nietzsche) are unquestionably what Bloom calls "bad guys," along with Dewey and Heidegger. And there is Woody Allen, mentioned repeatedly, probably the veritable archetype of nihilism. In many ways, Bloom reminds me more of Bellow's disillusioned old Mr. Sammler (in Mr. Sammler's Planet) than he does of Herzog. He also reminds me of Dean Cord in The Dean's December, one of those Bellovian characters who sees himself caught between the rigidities (and brocade survivals) of Communist Bucharest and Chicago's vulgarity and violence. He laments the constant repetition of claims that the modern personality is schizoid, that feelings are atrophied, "the whole bit, crazy, and also boring. This goes back to the first axiom of nihilism, the highest values losing their value." And then he talks of being accused of "abyssifying and catastrophizing, with special effects like Cecil B. De Mille's;" and I must say that I find that a fair description of what happens in The Closing of the American Mind.

Tzvetan Todorov, the critic, probably offered the best summary in his September review in The New Republic, where he marked the Cassandra cries being uttered in France as well as in the United States. "The substance of the argument," he wrote, "runs as follows. We no longer know how to tell good from evil, the beautiful from the ugly, the elevated from the moronic, the essential from the ridiculous. The fault lies with the relativism of values currently in vogue, with the rejection of all guiding principles other than tolerance. This relativism is the final consequence of the Cartesian revolution, which placed man at the center of the universe and transformed technical thinking, in the broader sense of the term, into the norm for all thought." There is some irony in the fact that Bloom's book, along with others by various French scholars, is a best-seller in France too, under the charming title of L'Ame Desarmee (or The Disarmed Soul). It is ironic because Bloom finds his examples of a truly rationalist

education in France, where even waiters present themselves as Cartesians. It is also depressing; since the acclaim it is receiving seems to be a function of a new-conservatism opposed to feminism (as "unnatural"), youth, popular arts, as well as nihilism, and what Todorov calls the "quotidian"--the concrete and the everyday. Almost all the reviewers, approving and disapproving, have noted the willingness of publics to accept the Bloomian diagnosis of their decline. This cannot but suggest a widespread fear of modernity, a half-articulated desire to reclaim (as Secretary William Bennett writes) a "legacy," to regain some lost order and equilibrium.

The appeal of Bloom's peculiar Platonism may be, in part, attributed to that longing for a transcendence of contingency and the messiness of things, that desire to return. "Openness" for Bloom is to be resisted. The point of our traditional call for freedom was, he insists, to protect reason, "to encourage the still voice of reason in a world that had always been dominated by fanaticisms and interests....The authors of The Federalist...were not particularly concerned with protecting eccentric or mad opinions or lifestyles. Such protection...is only an incidental result of the protection of reason and loses plausibility if reason is rejected." Professor Bloom is offended by the type of "openness" or relativism that treats all opinions and lifestyles as equivalent, that allows young people to say "no big deal" when challenged on amoral issue, that emphasizes freedom and equality even for the philistines. No longer, he says, do we posit an objective norm or standard against which to make judgments about what is right or wrong. We reject the role of reason itself, as we reject the "natural" and the universal. The way to counter this, as he told Eugene Kennedy in a New York Times Education Issue interview, is to seek out "magnificent dead alternatives to the kinds of things everybody said were the only currently acceptable modes of thought." Most particularly, we (or, at least, some of us) have to renew our faith in Socrates. As Benjamin Barber writes (in "The Philosopher Despot," Harper's Magazine, January 1988), the community of those who truly

"seek the truth" in Bloom's terms is a community of the elite, the very few.

Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher writing about Bloom in The New York Review of Books (November 5, 1987) under the title "Undemocratic Vistas," concurs. She objects specifically to Bloom's idea of philosophy as "the idea of a study that is open only to a chosen few especially suited by nature (and to some extent also by wealth and social position) for its pursuit; the idea of a philosophy that is more concerned with revealing fixed eternal truths than with active critical argument; of a philosophy that not only does not aim at justice and practical wisdom, individual and/or communal, but actually despises the search for social justice and beckons chosen souls away from social pursuits to a contemplative theoretical life." She points to Bloom's vague talk about "the ancients" and the absence of careful attention to specific works. She questions his odd reading of The Republic (after the example of his odd teacher Leo Strauss) as a text demonstrating the impossibility of creating an "ideal city, the rule of philosophers, or the equal education of women." She objects to his finding support for his anti-feminism in the work of the "ancients," work he believes supported "machismo...maleness or spiritedness, as the central natural passion in men's souls" as opposed to a concern that weakens for attachment and loyalty. Nussbaum reminds us that most major Greek thinkers agreed that learned rather than "natural" beliefs were important in the "formation of passions such as anger, fear, and grief. For this reason, the passions can be modified by a modification of belief." Not only does she pose a considerable challenge to Bloom's conceptions of the "natural;" she charges that he never engages in philosophical argument or reasoning, and does not make the kind of case even for his attack on relativism that might enable the general reader to assess what he is saying.

If this is the case, and it seems to be for many commentators, it becomes harder and harder to understand what he actually means by the "closing" of the mind. Closed to what--and how? What was the mind

like when it was open? What would it be like, for him, if is opened after a contemplation of his book? To write as he does is to suggest reliance on an ancient metaphor: the mind as a container, perhaps a casket. I cannot but free-associate to the beginning of one of our canonical American texts, Melville's Moby Dick, because of the contrasts there between what is closed and confining--and what is open and possible. "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth," says Melville's Ishmael, "whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." Bloom may have had similar experiences; but his responses are utterly different. Melville wrote about the landsmen "pent-up in lath and plaster"--all week "tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks." On Sundays they come to sit on pier-heads, to become "water-gazers" peering out to sea. He was concerned with a confinement suffered by ordinary working people and with their hunger for an "openness," looking outwards, imagining something better and more liberating for themselves.

For Bloom, there are only two kinds of openness, "the openness of indifference--promoted with the twin purposes of humbling our intellectual pride and letting us be whatever we want to be, just so long as we don't want to be knowers--and the openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude." What of those "landsmen"? What of the mass of students, ordinary students? Are they to be damned because they do not want to be "knowers" in the Bloomian sense? Is the only alternative to being closed in (in the Bloomian sense) a quest for knowledge and certitude?

Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Bloom condemns for his questioning of absolute values and his substituting of interpretation for the pursuit of eternal truths, wrote in his "Twilight of the Idols" (1889) about the three tasks for which educators are required. I find these a provocative alternative to Bloom's. They are: "One must learn to see,

one must learn to think, one must learn to speak and write: the goal in all three is a noble culture. Learning to see--accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides." Nietzsche meant, of course, suspending judgments, avoiding merely impulsive responses. He believed that thinking ought to be learned as a craft, "like dancing, as a form of dancing," and that a really noble education meant being able to dance "with concepts, with words" and "be able to do it with the pen too...." This is a view that emphasizes tentativeness, movement, the opening of perspective, the learning of a craft. In its approach to mind, it holds intimations of John Dewey's view (expressed in Art as Experience, 1934) that "mind is primarily a verb" never denoting anything "self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but...always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and groups." For Dewey (in total contrast to Bloom) mind "denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves." He objected specifically to treating mind as an independent entity with only an accidental relation to the environment and the body. And he spoke of "funded and retained meanings" forming an active background always assimilating the new and being remade, reconstructed in the course of every new contact with surroundings.

Blooms's attacks on both Nietzsche and Dewey are grounded in a kind of name-calling and belief in guilt by association. His objection to Nietzsche is that, classical scholar though he was, he took issue with Socrates, "the founder of the tradition of rationalism, which is the essence of the university." His influence was felt as well, Bloom says, in the founding of disciplines like sociology or psychology, none of which "was deeply influenced by Greek or Roman models." Worst of all, Nietzsche was "the source of various schools of phenomenology and existentialism." Rather than arguing with those "various schools," Bloom disposes of them through a heavy-handed lunge at Jean-Paul Sartre (always "under Nietzsche's spell") having "all those wonderful experiences of nothingness, the abyss, nausea, commitment without

ground--the result of which was, almost without fail, support of the Party line." He proceeds to do much the same thing with regard to Dewey. Dewey's liberalism, Bloom claims, is linked to a neglect of human rights; his philosophy is marked by a neglect of the "moral virtues." Moreover, he had a habit of regarding "the past as radically imperfect and...our history as irrelevant or as a hindrance to rational analysis of our present." Never quoting from any Deweyan text, he locates him in a tradition of "Marxist debunking of the Charles Beard variety" and disposes of him as an anti-rationalist, an enemy of the true university.

All this strikes me an a form of academicized McCarthyism (and for me, as it is not for Bloom, McCarthyism remains an enemy of our freedom and our democracy). Is it to be regarded as scholarly analysis? Does it come to honest terms with modernity? Does Bloom really confront contemporary conceptions of mind (the "closing" of which is his main theme)? Or does he, through irony and sardonic labeling, simply exclude from serious attention those who do not share his view of the university's raison d'etre? My problem, then, has only in part to do with a disagreement on the meanings of "openness" and the meanings of "mind." Like Nussbaum's, it is an objection to someone who refuses to argue in such a fashion as to involve his readers in thinking about what he is proposing. It is, as well, an objection to a fascination with stereotypes, a refusal to provide enough understanding of those he condemns to offer his readers any choice at all.

Bloom's truly evil presence, of course, is Martin Heidegger. It must be acknowledged that, whatever we choose to feel about Heidegger's career, he pondered the processes of thinking and the nature of mind with as much care and profundity as anyone in our century. For him, "opening" had to do with a disclosure accomplished as a "clearing away of concealments and obscurities" (Being and Time, 1962). It had intrinsically to do with thinking, responding to the "thought-provoking," that which offers us food for thought (What is Called Thinking?, 1968). It had to do with origins and memory, with

moving ahead in quest of clearings, in quest of openings, in search of what was not yet. And it had to do with self-reflectiveness, with the very nature of what it meant to be human and alive. Yes, it is a view entirely at odds with Bloom's version of rationalism. Should Heidegger's supposedly short-term decision publicly to support National Socialism in Germany be treated as a "corollary of his critique of rationalism" (actually, his critique of traditional views of Plato and Aristotle)? Is it, in other words, logically necessary (or, as Bloom writes, "no accident") that a critique of rationalism must lead to a pro-Nazi position? It is true that Bloom backs somewhat away from such a claim by concluding that Heidegger encouraged a "decision to devote...the life of the mind to an emerging revelation of being, incarnated in a mass movement" (whatever that might mean). It follows, for Bloom, that the Heideggerian approach to rationalism (being "the most powerful intellectual force in our times") was responsible for the destruction of the university and, most likely, for "the closing of the American mind."

It is difficult to follow the author's reasoning here; but it is not surprising that his chapter on the 1960s follows his charge that the Heidegger-induced crisis of the German university has become "the crisis of the university everywhere." The emergence of armed Black student protestors from a Cornell University dormitory seems to be his paradigm case. The "compliance" on the part of the Cornell faculty (along with the "cowardice" of certain ones) meant to him that a mass movement was allowed to destroy the integrity of the university once and for all. Damage had already been done by the influx of German refugee scholars, with their critical theories and their success in absolutizing and radicalizing democratic thought. The damage done in the 1960s, he suggests, followed what he describes as "one of the great periods of the American university" in the 1950's. Yes, that was the McCarthy period; but, for Bloom, McCarthvism had little effect on the range of thought and speech in the universities. In contrast, the 1960's left only disruption behind, a hollow morality, a posturing egotism, a collapse of standards and norms. The "grand American

liberal tradition of learning" was bankrupted; and we still remain in a version of Plato's dark cave. Clearly, this provides a number of clues to the popularity of the book: Bloom is resuscitating small-town America's fears and painful memories. He is informing great numbers of the public perhaps even disillusioned survivors, of the causes of our downfall; and he presents himself as one who knows the cure.

The surface appeal, of course, is to those concerned about the level of American literacy today; and I am not sure if Allan Bloom's success would have been so great if his book did not appear in the midst of the debate over "cultural literacy" and the linking of that literacy to our economic survival as a nation. Nevertheless, as I suggested earlier, I cannot but share his and others' discomfort at the flatness of so may students' responses, at their reduced capacity for indignation, at their often infuriating indifference (which, as Dewey once said, may be the opposite of "morality"). Few college teachers would disagree about the lack of shared cultural reference today, especially where literary and philosophical texts are concerned. I find myself frustrated and at the same time saddened by the thought that so few students have read (or intend to read) The Brothers Karamasov with its soul-stirring outcry about the abuse of children, or Shelley's amazingly emancipatory poetry, or Pascal's Pensees, or Rousseau's Emile, or even that remarkable tale of an American quest called The Invisible Man. Yes, they may have read The Color Purple since it was made into a film; but it is doubtful they have read Maya Angelou or James Baldwin, and even more doubtful that they have read George Eliot's Middlemarch. I am quite sure, as I search my own reasons for thinking all this so important, that the lacks are not due to critiques of rationalism or to relativism, or to the Germanification of thought. How many people, after all, have ever actually read a Heidegger text or any of Nietzsche's aphorisms? More seriously, how many have grown up in an environment where imaginative texts were truly prized, where Plato or Rousseau or Kant ever became the subjects of eager dialogue?

We who are teacher educators are inclined to place some of the onus on a long-standing inattention to the wonder of imaginative works and philosophic arguments in teacher-training institutions and in the public schools. Many of us are now in the position of trying to do something about repairing the lack, if we can resist the pervasive tendency to make involvement with the life of the mind merely peripheral to the search for success. We know we have to learn how to resist technicist and calculative thought as well, how to empower our students to deal critically with mystification. Unlike Allan Bloom, we are concerned with more than the privileged few (the would-be "philosopher-kings" he would like to find in the "great" universities). We are concerned with human beings in their vast plurality, with their diverse life-stories, their diverse and often desperate experiences. We are trying to turn our attention to young people reared in a media-dominated world, a consumerist world. We are bound, as we do so, to pay heed to social factors and social tragedies: the AIDS epidemic, the homeless families, the gentrified cities. None of this is mentioned in The Closing of the American Mind. The pressure to meet market demand is not mentioned, nor is the sense of powerlessness and cynicism evoked by the increased recognition of the covert activities in the American government, activities responsible for death squads and torture, as well as for what is touted as a struggle for "freedom" in the world. Rock music and relativism are harped on; but nowhere is there an expressed concern for the carelessness that marks our society, for the stress on competence rather than concern, for the erosion of communalism that affects "habits of the heart" in America today.

For Bloom, the kinds of students whose circumstances prevent their pursuing the kind of liberal education he describes (the kinds who are not "materially and spiritually free to do...what they want to do") have their own needs. Indeed, they may even have different characters from the ones he teaches at Chicago. We cannot make such distinctions and do not choose to do so. Nor can we accede to the same dualisms with respect to "openness" or rationalism or gender or even liberal education. Like Clifford Geertz, writing in Local Knowledge (1983), we

want to think of the various disciplines as "more than intellectual coigns of vantage," but ways of being in the world. We want to affirm, as Geertz and so many others do today, that "the hallmark of modern consciousness...is its enormous multiplicity." He calls the fear of relativism the "intellectualist Grande Peur," linked as it is to fears of subjectivism and particularism. He speaks of "versions and visions"; he speaks of translating meanings and intersubjectivity. Like Richard Rorty, he seems to believe that those in search of frameworks and universality are fundamentally desirous of constraint.

This is the most disturbing aspect of The Closing of the American Mind. Benjamin Barber makes the point that "the lugubrious lesson Americans may wish to draw from both Socrates and Bloom is that the philosopher's ideal of the open mind seems to flourish best in a closed society where, if philosophers do not rule, those who do rule must defer to philosophy." He believes that Bloom's book "offers certainty to the confused and comfort to the fearful. It is a new Book of Truth for an era after God. Its only rival is democracy, which Bloom, with those he comforts, can only despise." Martha Nussbaum, equally troubled by Bloom's conclusion that "real philosophical education must be at odds with democratic values," chooses to conclude with a verse from Walt Whitman's "Song of the Exposition," where the poet imagines the Greek muse choosing America as her home...

> vigorously clearing a
> path for herself, striding through the confusion,
> By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismayed,
> Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers,
> Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay.

Somehow that seems peculiarly appropriate for a dialogue sponsored by a Center for Education and Employment at Teachers College in 1987.

I cannot, however, withstand the temptation to end with an evocation of another Bloom, a far more interesting one. It is James Joyce's Leopold Bloom in Ulysses, in the section on "Night-town." Bloom is having a fantasy that he is being crowned king; and, after he is, he imagines himself saying: "My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand. Yea on the word of a Bloom, ye shall ere long enter into the golden city which is to be, the new Bloomusalem of the future...." We who are concerned with public education and democracy have to find another city--a city of multiple voices and wider and wider dialogues, a city where the open mind can transform the lived world.

Liberal Education and Academic Conservatives

William Birenbaum
President
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Brooklyn, New York

In a recent interview at the University of Chicago, Professor Bloom expressed his delight in his new celebrityhood and his astonishment at the press and sales his book has generated, even as he elaborated his blistering attack on the popular culture which had instantly made him a celebrity and richer. Leaning back, the report says, on a black leather couch in his handsomely furnished apartment overlooking the Midway, he recited his litany of complaints about the state of this republic: the nihilism, materialism, relativistic attitude toward values, the incapacity to sustain a decent public debate about virtue and vice, all forces and trends subversive of Western civilization's heritage, all symptoms of a decadent culture producing a callow youth, disintegrating families, a population ignorant of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, rotten rock music, shallow sexual seances, a fraudulent educational system empty of content. In place of a republic such as this, Professor Bloom offers Plato's Republic, a realm driven by the search for the good life outside the cave of ignorance in the bright sunshine of the truth. Tentatively he suggests the great books as vehicles for coming out.

But some profound differences in material realities and abstract values stand behind and between the imagination driving the American republic toward its destiny, and the imagination which guided Plato toward his version of how the republic ought to be.

Foremost among these differences is the fact that the standards now used for admission to a liberal education at places like the University of Chicago screen out and deny access to the overwhelming majority of the nation's youth of college age. This fact stands in some tense contrast to the nation's commitment to open access to the resources of all of its institutions for all of its people. Unlike Plato's

republic, this is one in which slavery has been officially abolished, and where the consequences of that permeate almost every item on this country's agenda. Rejoicing in our heterogeneity, we are committed to the proposition that the dynamics of the cultural pluralism is both the bulwark of our freedoms and the generator of our excellence. In very practical terms, therefore, acceptance and nihilism, relativism and commitment, self and systems subversive of self coexist, and it is that coexistence on and off the campuses of the colleges and universities which frame the terms of our debate about virtue and vice. These commitments have taken us both to the peaks of achievement and to the pits of poverty, the dregs of discrimination, the fallout of our own slavery, and certain sources of intolerance,--religious and others--deeply embedded in Western civilization.

Now we're on the crest of one of the two largest waves of immigration in the history of any nation on earth. For decent and virtuous reasons, we're welcoming millions of Hispanics, Asians, Caribbeans, Eastern Europeans, and others into the ranks of citizenship and the republic of philosopher kings. By the turn of the century, at least a third of our people will be "others" having experienced and come to believe other things. While large numbers of these, given the present rigging of our educational system, will leave our schools unable to read the great books, most growing up here will have thought thoughts and experienced life in terms of ideas the great books express. It's not a compromise of their humanity that they may not be able to read. It is a challenge to us as educators to show the connections between life in terms of the great thoughts they have, and the books, in order to inspire them to want to learn to read. It's a tragic probability, as things now stand, that most of these people, as well as the majority of the rest of America, will be denied a liberal education of any kind, and in no small part because of the approach the Blooms take toward the challenge.

It must be also noted that poor Plato's education, as he set about to imagine his republic, was not enriched by the television tube, the

communications satellite, the videocassette, computerized printing, or the stereo disk. Science and technology have irrevocably transformed culture and reshaped the debates about virtue and vice in our law courts, senates, theatres, schools, art museums, homes, beds, hospitals, churches, and pentagons. Science and technology have profoundly changed and are changing still the nature of productive work, what people do to earn a living and what they need to know in order to do it.

Making a living, or not making one, is a deeply moving human experience of a magnitude in impact upon human existence comparable to sexual experience, religious or artistic inspiration, the exhilaration of sport, the psychological affects of family life. Naturally, the work experience is often a major theme in art, theatre, literature, political discourse, and economic theory and practice. It has often inspired the most extraordinary scientific discoveries and technological translations.

Employed people devote about half or more of every wakeful day to the work place, which is often their main arena to enact the issues, to live the issues a liberal education is supposed to address. Work does produce a material result which in turn governs the quality of life for the worker in health, recreation, the family, politics and elsewhere. In this sense, a concern about employment and its consequences is materialistic, but it is also something more.

While one might argue that in the ideal academic situation the student should be relieved of the materialistic exigencies of the real world, and be inspired by loftier motivations, this is a condition which only a very small minority of the earth's people may now enjoy. But even if one believes that the isolated, detached, contemplative, scholarly environment is essential to pondering the great human issues, life in work is certainly one of those issues. This fact presents a pedagogical problem. Aristotle also said, "What we have to learn to do

we learn best by doing." A certain active engagement is required to address the work issue successfully in scholarly terms.

This is a reality that liberal education has yet to confront seriously or effectively. The tension between thinking and doing, implicit in Professor Bloom's reactionary approach to liberal education, is actually subversive of a liberal education appropriate to this kind of a republic.

If we accept this conclusion, we must at least revise the admission standards and possibly the curriculum at my alma mater in Chicago, as well as reconsider what our great public universities and community college systems are doing in behalf of the liberal education of our people. A liberal education which fails to address the materialistic and other consequences of work and preparation for employment is not a very good liberal education, just as a professional or vocational education insensitive to the great human issues implicit in work is not very good either.

What we have here is an American culture increasingly implemented through science and technology, committed to pluralistic values, heterogeneity, individual freedom and open access, in which a vibrant thrust toward greater equality must co-exist, however uneasily, with the pursuit of excellence. Such a society is irrevocably required to educate the masses of its people, to prepare them for employability and to participate effectively in the ongoing debate about the great issues and values implicit in such a republic. Having abandoned slavery and armed ourselves with novel and incredible instruments for perceiving and materially changing the world, we have utterly recast the challenge of the education for philosopher kings.

The issue is not simply whether a liberal education is desirable and essential, but if it is desirable and essential, can it be democratized, implemented for the masses to whom there is an irrevocable educational commitment.

If the answer to this question is in the negative, as Professor Bloom suggests, then we must change the terms of the issue. For whom is a liberal education not essential? For whom is it not desirable? Who should be excluded and on what terms? What is the impact of exclusion upon the basic premises undergirding this kind of a republic? But if a liberal education is desirable and essential for everyone in the American republic, can it be provided in Allan Bloom's terms in the light of his hostility to the potential students and their motivations in seeking it, a hostility which really reflects his antipathy toward the values guiding the way this republic is becoming?

In spite of their pained exclamations, as Professor Bloom's barbs prick their egos, most American academics preach what Bloom preaches, although Bloom probably is correct in his conclusion that very few of them practice what they or he preach. They too are trapped in the web of what they regard as our disintegrating culture, and like Bloom, end up being uncomfortable Americans who imagine that somewhere in the past things used to be better.

They get caught up in an impossible chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. Only a decent liberal education can save this culture from collapse, but the culture, which according to these critics has already collapsed, precludes the implementation of a decent liberal education. It is not the American mind which is closed to this republic's potential. It is the minds of the Blooms and his colleagues which must be reopened to reconsider what is morally decent as judged by the actual facts of American life. Their closed minds frame a formidable obstacle to the expression of our virtues.

The actual facts of American educational life point toward the necessity of a far-reaching revision of both the methods and the content of liberal education. Consider, for example, the profile of the twelve million people currently enrolled in our country's accredited colleges and universities. Two-thirds are commuters, and

fifty percent of all undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges, which become, therefore, a major, if not the only source, for whatever liberal education they ever get. Of all the students and those who teach them in this country now, forty percent are part-timers. Within five years, at least half of all the students in American higher education will be over twenty-five years old and more than a fifth will be over thirty-five. Half attend more than one college in the process of obtaining a degree. Among secondary school graduates who go on to college, one out of three delay entry by at least one year after high school. Transfer-in students now account for more than forty percent of the enrollments in undergraduate education, including the Ivy League colleges. The majority of the twelve million are enrolled in large urban-based institutions. Eighty percent attend public ones. In some regions of our country now, the number of four-year college graduates who subsequently enroll in two-year colleges for an additional credential exceeds the number of two-year college graduates who then enroll in a four-year college for an additional credential.

This is not the profile for which colleges and universities have been traditionally designed. This is not the kind of clientele for which they organize their calendars or plan their campus communities. They have assumed the traditional full-time commitment of their students and employees over a number of years in a rather more than less sequestered residential campus community. Most of the private liberal arts colleges established during the last century are located geographically remote from urban, cultural centers. Their curricula have distinguished sharply between liberal or cultural education and preparation for careers or professions. Their programs generally assume that these two separate streams, each potentially contaminating the other, are best staged sequentially rather than simultaneously. Their programs usually assume, whatever the life circumstances of the students, that the undergraduate years are necessarily the prime time for the transmission of culture. Finally, while lip service is paid to diversity, admissions and performance standards, curricula, and the organization of campus environment assume the homogeneity of the

students being served. And, of course, such homogeneity inevitably projects certain class prejudices. There's a huge gap between these traditional assumptions and the reality of academe's markets in the U.S.. This gap expresses academe's traditional resistance to what is happening in the society it is supposed to serve.

Allan Bloom has expressed surprise and dismay upon finding that many of his critics identify him with the radical right and the fundamentalists. Perhaps he has a point. For among those who would be his most enthusiastic admirers for political reasons may be a few who have actually read Plato's Republic and taken note of Plato's disapproval of music and poetry (art forms which he thought generated an emotional atmosphere subversive of rational thought) and of his open celebration of homosexuality.

More fundamentally, however, Bloom misunderstands his critics either because he misunderstands the dynamics and aspirations of the republic where he enjoys citizenship, or because he has closed his mind to those aspirations and simply does not feel at home with the dynamics they produce.

In any event, Allan Bloom affords both reactionaries and would-be reformers a provocative class session, or a session about class. He is an integral part of our liberal education, therefore, a provocation to reopen our minds to the tremendous potential of this republic's future.

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The Institute on Education and the Economy (IEE) of Teachers College, Columbia University was established by the Board of Trustees in March 1986 to conduct research on the fundamental issues of education and the economy. The Institute administers and provides quality control for several foundation research grants and for the National Center on Education and Employment (NCEE), funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education.

The interdisciplinary IEE and NCEE research team includes economists at the RAND Corporation, a partner with Teachers College in the NCEE, and at Columbia University's Department of Economics, Graduate School of Business, and the Conservation of Human Resources Project. It draws anthropologists, sociologists, historians, educators, and cognitive psychologists from Teachers College, Columbia University, RAND, and CUNY Graduate Center.

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